

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN THE ARAB WORLD: HOW RELEVANT IS THE TURKISH EXPERIENCE?

The Jasmine revolution in Tunisia and the popular uprising in Egypt have opened the way for these Arab countries to initiate their transitions to democracy. The burning question, however, is what sort of democracy will they be? The fear of power falling into the hands of political Islamists has been a recurrent theme of global commentary on these momentous events. Yet some experts have argued that there is the potential for a different, more positive outcome – pointing in particular to Turkey’s experience. So, what lessons can the aspiring democracies of the Arab world learn from Turkey?

As a predominantly Muslim country that has displayed strong economic dynamism within a democratic context, Turkey appears to offer a relevant example for many Arab nations. Nonetheless one should shy away from overdrawing a parallel between the two. The roots of Turkish democracy stretch back to 1950 and today’s Turkey is the product of a decades long transformation. Setting the short- or even medium-term benchmarks for the newly democratising Arab nations on the basis of the achievements of modern day Turkey is therefore misguided.

One should also bear in mind that Turkey’s democratic transition has been path-dependent. The starting conditions were highly influential in determining present day outcomes; Turkey started its own transition at a time when it was already firmly anchored in the West. The country had become a member of the Council of Europe as well as NATO in the early part of the 1950s and had already gone through the secularising reforms of the Ataturk era, consolidating fundamental values such as the emancipation of women.

Despite these differences, Turkey’s democratic transition does hold a number of interesting lessons for the



Istanbul, 29 April 2007 when more than one million people took part in a mass rally in support of secularism and democracy

Arab world. The role of the military is certainly one such case. For a long time, the Turkish military acted as the guardian of the regime and set the limits of democratic practice. The military allowed the emergence of an open political arena with a wide range of players, even including Islamists. They intervened and staged military coups on two occasions (in 1960 and 1980) but rapidly returned the country to democratic rule on both occasions.

The military’s role was condoned by the West in the Cold War years under the specter of the Soviet threat. It was only after the fall of the Berlin Wall that this outlook changed radically and the military’s political influence started to be criticised more openly by Turkey’s own Allies. As a result, the military’s domestic political influence and legitimacy began to gradually erode. Today the army’s influence has radically diminished and the political process has started to operate without any interference from the top brass. Yet what characterised

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Turkish democracy for a very long time was this delicate balance of powers between democratic forces and the army.

In Turkey's case, the major challenges during the transition to multi-party democracy were the emergence of authoritarianism and political polarisation. Authoritarianism manifested itself in the willingness of the ruling party to capture the state institutions with a slew of partisan appointments, eliminate dissent and increase pressure on the opposition. The first military coup in 1960 was ostensibly staged to stop this drift towards further authoritarianism. The panacea was a new constitution and new electoral laws, which introduced the principle of proportional representation as a measure against this kind of over accumulation of political power.

A major shortcoming of democratic practice in Turkey has been the lack of a consensus driven political culture. As a result, parliamentary politics have tended to become increasingly polarised. The degree of polarisation attained such a level in the late 1970s that the

whole democratic system of governance became dysfunctional, inviting yet another military intervention.

It is clear that both of these military interventions could have been prevented by more mature democratic institutions. The fundamental lesson from the Turkish experience is, therefore, that the sustainability of democracy depends largely on the quality of democratic institutions. The focus in Arab countries should therefore be on the consolidation of these institutions. There is no time to lose if democratic transition is to succeed. Establishing effective political parties, independent judiciaries, bipartisan election boards, unhindered media and functional parliaments should be the key objectives. It was only after consolidating these institutions that Turkey was able to shed itself of the influence of the military. For that, Turkish society had to develop confidence in the institutions' ability to protect a pluralistic democratic order from its potential detractors, including political Islamists. It will therefore only be after consolidating essential democratic institutions that Arab countries will learn to successfully combine Islam, democracy and modernity.

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